



“Helping You Make Room in Your Life for Your Needs”: When Organizations Appropriate Family Roles

Erika L. Kirby

To cite this article: Erika L. Kirby (2006) “Helping You Make Room in Your Life for Your Needs”: When Organizations Appropriate Family Roles, *Communication Monographs*, 73:4, 474-480, DOI: 10.1080/03637750601061208

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03637750601061208>



Published online: 03 Feb 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 239



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 14 View citing articles [↗](#)

“Helping You Make Room in Your Life for Your Needs”: When Organizations Appropriate Family Roles

Erika L. Kirby

As communication-based literature on the intersections of working/institutional and personal/family life¹ continues to accumulate, it is clear that many organizations now focus on helping employees to lead “balanced” lives (for summaries, see Golden, Kirby, & Jorgenson, 2006; Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003). As Kirby, Wieland, and McBride (2006) illustrate, existing research on the intersection between work/institutional and personal/family life (WI↔PF) extends from micro-level analyses of individual perceptions of stress, to interpersonal negotiations of “balance,” to organizational initiatives to assist employees in “balancing” WI↔PF life—a current example comes from Deloitte & Touche (2006), a company that has “developed work/life balance programs to *help you make room in your life for these important needs*” (emphasis added). Through a combination of policies, programs, and rhetoric similar to this, I contend organizations have taken steps to become more like employees’ personal and family lives. Issues and concerns that may formerly have been framed as “personal” or “private” (PF) have now become the purview of organizations (WI).

We are Here to Help: The (Organizational) Family Helping Employees Meet Their Life Needs

My contribution to this forum is to illustrate how organizations are appropriating *family-like roles* in initiatives they offer, and in the process are further obfuscating the (socially constructed) boundaries between WI and PF life. As organizations “help” with PF issues that in the past would have been handled in the family system, this reproduces what Hochschild (2003) calls “the commercialization of intimate life.” For instance, family members are often “expected” to help with caregiving of kin, and organizations also help here by providing work–life/work–family programs in the

Erika L. Kirby (PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is Chair and Associate Professor at Creighton University. This article was invited by the Issue Forum Editors. Correspondence to: Erika Kirby, Department of Communication Studies, Creighton University, Omaha, NE 68178, USA. Email: ekirby@creighton.edu

forms of leave policies, flexible work options, and dependent-care benefits (for review of such policies, see Kirby et al., 2006). Organizations who do not have in-house resources for helping may provide employees access to companies such as Resources on Call, Inc. (2006), a firm that not only provides childcare, eldercare, and work–life referrals but also helps find “pet sitters for an emergency business trip, landscapers for weekly mowing, and handymen for a host of annoying small jobs.” When employees use the organization’s “help” to obtain these (personal) services, where does WI life end and PF life begin? In the remainder of this essay, I expand upon two additional family-like roles taken on by organizations—(a) showing concern for physical and mental health and (b) encouraging spirituality—utilizing work in communication studies as relevant. I conclude with communicative (and ethical) implications of how these appropriations blur “boundaries” between WI and PF life.

Families Concern Over Physical and Mental Health ↔ Organizations Promote “Wellness”

In recent decades, organizations have become interested in the health of employees much like a concerned family member. Wellness programs to help employees get “healthy”² have increased in efforts to save employers in healthcare costs, to improve worker efficiency, to reduce absenteeism, and to create employee loyalty (Meisler, 2004; Zoller, 2003). Such programs include health screening and education, ergonomic assessments, nutrition classes, intramural sports programs, fitness programs, and recreation centers (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005; Zoller, 2003). Zoller (2003) illustrates how the organization has “*expand[ed] operations to areas once considered to be private*, including cardiovascular health, nutrition, weight loss, smoking cessation, hypertension control, stress management, and fitness levels” (p. 174, emphasis added). Kirby (2006) illustrates how organizational wellness programs may be covert in her case of a company that mandated management to (try to) climb Colorado’s Mount Elbert. To be able to make the climb, many employees had to quit smoking and/or lose weight in the 6 months between the announcement and the climb itself.³

Beyond physical health, in personal situations involving alcohol/drug abuse, family violence, divorce, and financial problems (etc.), individuals often turn to family for advice and assistance. Appropriating yet another family role, many organizations now also “counsel” such personal issues through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that allow employees (limited) free and confidential access to mental health professionals for a wide range of personal, emotional, and psychological problems (Arthur, 2000; Primm, 2006). In communication studies, May (2004) has studied EAPs as a “question of boundaries” (p. 410) as to how WI life expands into employees’ PF lives as well as to their discursive and ideological ramifications.

Another aspect of mental health involves stress, and to “help” employees with this, organizations offer stress-management training, including information on relaxation techniques (e.g., Arthur, 2000). In addition, some organizations promote time-management/lifestyle changes to help their employees prioritize their daily activities (Zoller, 2003); perhaps the most striking exemplar is the institutionalization of

Covey's (1989) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as a personal and organizational change program (Carlone, 2001, 2006). Together these researchers illustrate some of the potential communicative (and other) implications of organizations taking on a family-like role in taking a concern with employees' physical and mental health.

Families "Pray Together to Stay Together" ↔ Organizations Encourage Spirituality

The family is typically where individuals are socialized (or not) to be spiritual (and perhaps religious). Some organizations have now appropriated this family-like role; there is a growing trend toward spirituality in the workplace (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). While some companies are taking practical action in setting up "quiet rooms" for meditation, reflection, and prayer (Salopek, 2004), more philosophical approaches to integrating spirituality into working life also exist. According to the International Coalition of Workplace Ministries director (ICWM), this means (a) doing work honoring one's personal values as well as corporate values, (b) standing up for what is right, (c) living by the Golden Rule, and (d) honoring one's employer by doing an honest day's work (Salopek, 2004, p. 18). The mere existence of the ICWM as an institution evidences how organizations are increasingly linking spirituality and work.

Consequently, an emerging body of research examines how organizations utilize (and/or coopt) spirituality (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006). In communication, most of the (limited) research on spirituality focuses on organizations that have an expected spiritual/religious focus in light of mission (e.g., Leeman's, 2006, study of public ↔ private paradoxes in organizing a home-based church). In addition, critical scholars have explored the implications of using corporate spirituality as a means of motivating employees (e.g., Nadesan, 1999).

Perhaps the most developed case study of a (traditional) corporate-based organizational model moving toward the spiritual is provided by Goodier and Eisenberg (2006). Their ethnography details how a midwestern health system employed "a methodology for reawakening spirit and values at work known as *Higher Ground Leadership* (HGL)" (p. 50). At the retreat introducing the change, some spiritually focused moves included introducing a new vocabulary for organizing using "love," "joy," "grace," "circle," and "energy" and encouraging participants to practice daily meditation to "quiet the mind and body" (p. 51). Participants adopted this language and aligned their previous organizational vocabulary with HGL principles. In addition, offices were transformed into "soulsaces," and "emotional spaces" were created through rites and rituals. In a striking exemplar of how organizations take on family roles, at employee orientation "digital pictures of new employees were included in an existing slide show of employees and displayed to the song 'We Are Family'" (p. 57). Overall, Goodier and Eisenberg:

[S]ee how spirituality can be exploitive in its efforts to engender greater identification and commitment from employees that creates unobtrusive control where employees work harder, longer, and discipline themselves in the interests of the organization ... in the end however, we find there are indications that

employees are emancipated by these efforts more than they are controlled by them.
(p. 61)

Communicative Implications of Organizations “Helping” by Appropriating Family Roles

From a communicative standpoint, what is of interest at this intersection of organizations and family-like roles? We must first recognize that organizations have motives for fulfilling these roles that usually involve competitive advantage and cost savings rather than altruism. Organizations assume employees will be happier and more productive if their mental/physical health issues and spiritual needs can be accommodated through work. Yet, as Kirby and Krone (2002) illustrated, just because initiatives exist on paper does not mean people feel free to utilize them. Wellness programs, EAPs, time-management programs, and workplace spirituality programs are all (re)produced in interaction, and therefore communication scholars should take an interest in how these (family-like) initiatives are talked about by employees with co-workers, supervisors, subordinates, and indeed their own families.

Furthering this emphasis on discourse, communication scholars are also well situated to examine how organizations talk about *themselves* when appropriating family-like roles. Kirby, Pawlowski, and Dressel (2000) studied the rhetorical positioning of work–life issues and policies in the recruiting materials of the (then) Big Five accounting firms. They found organizations positioned as *helpers*, *enablers*, *competitors*, *businesses*, or *communities* in describing their orientation to work–life issues. Similar research might be done on any of these family-like programs to compare frames/positions. How do organizations justify their appropriation of family-like roles and blurring the public and the private?

But perhaps what I see as the most fruitful area for exploration is taking a critical communicative stance toward the ethical implications of the increased blurring between WI and PF, and how these programs may coopt employees under the guise of helping them to “balance” or improve their lives (e.g., Kirby, 2006). An irony across these initiatives is that while they are organizationally coordinated, the onus of change is placed on the individual—implying that since the organization fulfilled a supportive (family-like) role in providing these programs, it need not change “job characteristics and work routines that cause stress for workers” but instead can continue to be stressful (Murphy & Sauter, 2003, p. 154). Zoller (2003) points out this individual focus; in her 2-year study, no health information was presented that touched on workplace or environmental risks through the wellness program (instead, it was all on diet and exercise), even though employees reported “physical injuries, repetitive motion problems, chemical exposure, and a host of other problems from their jobs” (p. 186).

Indeed, there is a tendency to see individuals who cannot control their levels of stress, or remain in shape (etc.) as professionally inadequate. Kelly and Colquhoun (2005) argue “a duty of care [exists] to manage one’s health and well-being to maximize organizational performance and effectiveness” (p. 135). Individuals need to

“rein in” their PF lives for the benefit of their WI lives. The communication research detailed herein illustrated this “professional duty” in multiple ways. In Kirby’s (2006) study, a preclimb weight loss competition ensued among co-workers to the point where dropping pounds became equated with being a valuable employee. Zoller (2003) found a similar result; in her study, employees conceptualized health and fitness as god terms individuals needed to work to achieve through self-discipline and hard work (in contrast to laziness). Thus, “healthy and fit” individuals constructed their identities in opposition to others who had not shown the necessary self-control to achieve the same standard of fitness. Carlone (2001) outlines a similar point in relation to time-management programs: “The preferred method for maintaining a positive self-concept requires each individual subject to work on herself or himself” and so the larger system is left “unexamined and unaltered” (p. 492).

Overall, I argue these appropriations of family-like roles by the organization exemplify the corporate colonization of the life world (Deetz, 1992), particularly as evidenced in (a) an ideology of managerialism that seeks efficiency, productivity, and loyalty from employees (sometimes through self-denial and self-control; Zoller, 2003) interwoven with (b) an ethics of paternalism where an individual’s right and capacity to make a decision is taken away (Neill, 2004). Kirby (2006) argued that in mandating a mountain climb, management laid claim to employees’ very bodies by requiring a task that necessitated employees improve their physical fitness—ultimately creating a covert wellness program because no choice was involved. The company was essentially saying that “we know better than you what is best for you and your body,” making health a political issue (Zoller, 2003). These examples highlight particular instances of managerialism and paternalism, but in some sense, all these programs as described imply the organization knows what is best for individuals’ personal lives.

In summary, I explored several family-like roles that organizations have appropriated, focusing centrally on promoting “wellness” and encouraging spirituality; I argued that as organizations take on these “helping” roles, they subsequently exert control over employees’ health and spirituality. Organizations have colonized realms that were formerly private by performing family-like roles and this phenomena seems worthy of additional work in the communication discipline. Where does working/institutional life end and personal/family life begin? Or perhaps the more pointed question, Does this distinction even matter anymore?

Notes

- [1] Since 2000 I have personally moved from “work–family” (too exclusionary) to “work–life” (is work not part of life?) to trying “personal–professional life” (Kirby, in press), to, for the purposes of this forum, using working/institutional and personal/family life in keeping with the editors’ vision.
- [2] While “health” can be defined as social, spiritual, psychological, and/or physical (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005), in these programs it is most often defined as physical and mental health (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005; Zoller, 2003).
- [3] Six days before the event, managers were told they could not be mandated to climb.

References

- Arthur, A. (2000). Employee assistance programmes: The emperor's new clothes of stress management? *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 28, 549–559.
- Buzzanell, P. M., & Harter, L. M. (2006). (De)centering and (re)envisioning the secular hegemony of organizational communication theory and research. *Communication Studies*, 57, 1–3.
- Carlone, D. (2001). Enablement, constraint, and *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14, 491–497.
- Carlone, D. (2006). The ambiguous nature of a management guru lecture: Providing answers while deepening uncertainty. *Journal of Business Communication*, 43, 89–112.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Deetz, S. A. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Deloitte & Touche. (2006). *Work–life balance programs homepage*. Retrieved May 15, 2006, from http://careers.deloitte.com/culture_benefits.aspx?CountryContentID=8220
- Farrell, A., & Geist-Martin, P. (2005). Communicating social health: Perceptions of wellness at work. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 18, 543–592.
- Golden, A. G., Kirby, E. L., & Jorgenson, J. (2006). Work–life research from both sides now: An integrative perspective for organizational and family communication. In C. Beck (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 30* (pp. 143–195). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Goodier, B. C., & Eisenberg, E. (2006). Seeking the spirit: Communication and the (re)development of a “spiritual” organization. *Communication Studies*, 57, 47–65.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003). *The commercialization of intimate life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kelly, P., & Colquhoun, D. (2005). The professionalization of stress management: Health and well-being as a professional duty of care? *Critical Public Health*, 15(2), 135–145.
- Kirby, E. L. (Ed.). (in press). Communication and the accomplishment of personal and professional life [Special issue]. *Electronic Journal of Communication/La Revue Electronique de Communication*.
- Kirby, E. L. (2006). Your attitude determines your altitude: Reflecting on a company-sponsored mountain climb. In J. Keyton & P. Shockley-Zalabak (Eds.), *Organizational communication: Understanding communication processes* (2nd ed., pp. 99–108). Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
- Kirby, E. L., Golden, A. G., Medved, C. E., Jorgenson, J., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2003). An organizational communication challenge to the discourse of work and family research: From problematics to empowerment. In P. J. Kalbfleisch (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 27* (pp. 1–43). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kirby, E. L., & Krone, K. J. (2002). “The policy exists but you can’t really use it”: Communication and the structuration of work-family policies. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 30, 50–77.
- Kirby, E. L., Pawlowski, D. R., & Dressel, C. (2000, April). *To promote or not to promote? Work–family programs as corporate discourse*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organizational and Professional Division of the Central States Communication Association, Detroit, MI.
- Kirby, E. L., Wieland, S., & McBride, M. C. (2006). Work–life communication. In J. Oetzel & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *Handbook of conflict communication* (pp. 327–357). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Leeman, M. (2006). A house divided against itself cannot stand: Problematizing public and private in organized religion. *Communication Studies*, 57, 5–23.
- May, S. (2004). A question of boundaries. In G. Cheney, L. T. Christensen, T. E. Zorn, & S. Ganesh (Eds.), *Organizational communication in an age of globalization: Issues, reflection, practices* (p. 410). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

- Meisler, A. (2004). All aboard. *Workforce Management*, 83(7), 29–34.
- Mitroff, I., & Denton, E. (1999). *A spiritual audit of corporate America: A hard look at spirituality, religion and values in the workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Murphy, L. R., & Sauter, S. L. (2003). The USA perspective: Current issues and trends in the management of work stress. *The Australian Psychologist*, 38, 151–157.
- Nadesan, M. H. (1999). The discourses of corporate spiritualism and evangelical capitalism. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 13, 3–42.
- Neill, J. (2004, February 4). *Outdoor education, ethics, and moral development*. Retrieved February 24, 2005, from <http://www.wilderdom.com/EthicsMoralDevelopment.htm>
- Primm, D. (2006). What workplace stress research is telling technical communicators. *Technical Communication*, 52, 449–455.
- Resources on Call. (2006). *Homepage*. Retrieved May 15, 2006, from <http://www.resources-on-call.com/index.htm>
- Salopek, J. J. (2004). Engaging mind, body, and spirit at work. *Training and Development*, 58(11), 17–19.
- Zoller, H. M. (2003). Working out: Managerialism in workplace health promotion. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 17, 171–205.